
Soul Magnification: A Heartfelt Tribute and a New Christmas Pageant

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It was a steamy summer day in July 2015 when I moved to Columbus to begin my position as assistant professor of Old Testament at Trinity. Summer Sampler students poured their youthful energy into one of the day's acts of mission: helping me and my family unload boxes of books for my office from the U-Haul truck. Dr. Wally Taylor was there too. Pulling a wagon with supplies (as he is wont to do), Dr. Taylor arrived at the Trinity parking lot with sweet frozen red grapes and bottles of chilled water. We, the truck unloaders, all enjoyed this refreshing (and biblical!) snack. Soon after I began teaching at Trinity, I realized these initial moments provided an indicative snapshot of Wally Taylor's generosity and consideration as a colleague, professor, scholar, and Christian.

Not surprisingly then, Dr. Taylor's scholarship includes a focus on hospitality. In a recent article, "The Family That Eats Together...: 1 Corinthians 11:17–34 from a Mediterranean Perspective,"¹ Dr. Taylor provides a social scientific analysis of the household portrayed in Pauline letters. The article interweaves experiences from his own Mediterranean travels to offer anthropological insights about how Paul understood the community of Christ-believers² as a fictive family. A study of the word ἀδελφοί in 1 Corinthians 11:33, explored in this article, reveals that early believers in Christ remain bound to each other through baptism, as a blood family is still related even if the bond is not acknowledged.

"The Family That Eats Together" also discusses various ways that readers can connect with the Bible's culture. Dr. Taylor suggests, "One possibility is to enter the world of the text as though the readers' world and the world of the text are the same, so that the language and customs of the text are understood in immediate

1. Walter F. Taylor Jr., "The Family That Eats Together...: 1 Corinthians 11:17–34 from a Mediterranean Perspective" in *Exploring Biblical Kinship: Festschrift in Honor of John J. Pilch* (eds. Joan C. Campbell and Patrick J. Hartin; Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series 55; Washington, D. C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2016), 101–130.

2. Taylor offers a helpful distinction between "Christ-believer" and "Christian"; the latter term he finds anachronistic in a first century Palestinian context. As referenced in footnote 1 of the article cited above, further discussion can be found in Walter F. Taylor, Jr., *Paul, Apostle to the Nations: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 5–6.

A strong focus on the life of the church is a resonant theme in Dr. Taylor's scholarship and teaching. With this script, I hope to make a small contribution that serves an evident goal of Dr. Taylor's career: to teach and strengthen the family of Christians.

reference to the readers' world."³ A modern manifestation of this integrated approach to the Bible is the annual Christmas pageant, a beloved tradition in many congregations, where children re-enact the story of Jesus' birth. The pageant brings together families, both by blood and faith, to grow in the knowledge and love of God. Given this, as a tribute to my colleague, I would like to offer an original Christmas pageant that I hope will be staged in churches. A strong focus on the life of the church is a resonant theme in Dr. Taylor's scholarship and teaching. With this script, I hope to make a small contribution that serves an evident goal of Dr. Taylor's career: to teach and strengthen the family of Christians.

"Soul Magnification": A new Christmas pageant

This Christmas pageant also stems from my own frustration with the scores of Christmas pageants that I have seen or been in since childhood. The typical pageant script may offer a slight creative twist on the Christmas story, but the standard outline is very predictable. The infancy narratives, primarily drawn from Luke 2:1–21 and Matthew 2:1–12, are woven together to create a seamless story. Most people do not realize that two different (and conflicting!) Gospel accounts make up "the biblical Christmas

3. Taylor, "The Family that Eats Together," 103.

4. A few cursory examples illustrate the point. The angel speaks to Zechariah and Mary in Luke's Gospel (1:8–38), but to Joseph in

story” as we know it. The pageant viewers’ attention goes to the children dressed as Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, the angels, etc. People in the pews behold a parade of cuteness, cellphones snapping away. I am as guilty as anyone of taking those pictures and noticing how adorable the children are in the pageant (especially during the years when they were *my* children). So my frustration comes not from what takes place in our Christmas pageants, but what does not.

In a standard Christmas pageant, non-existent characters from the Bible get significant airtime, but pivotal characters in the Bible are ignored. Many churchgoers could not tell you the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth in Luke 1, yet their birth narrative ties to Mary’s in critical respects.⁵ Conversely, a child in a pageant who is cast as the innkeeper or as one of the three wise ones has an important role. Yet in Luke 1:7, we simply read that there was “no room in the inn” for Mary and Joseph. No one says these words except the narrator. Even people with a passing knowledge of the Christmas story know that there were three wise men [*sic*], but Matthew 2:1–11 only describes the magi as the bearers of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The text indicates that there was

Matthew’s annunciation (1:20–23). In Luke’s infancy narrative, Mary and Joseph leave Nazareth and travel to Bethlehem for a census (Luke 2:1–4), which is not mentioned in Matthew. Rather, in Matthew’s infancy narrative, the magi travel to find Jesus in Bethlehem; seemingly he has been there for a long time while they make the trip (Matt 2:1–12). In Luke 2:7, Mary lays Jesus “in a manger” or “in a stall” (ἐν φάτνῃ) because the inn is full. Conversely, Matt 2:11 has the magi entering “into the house” (εἰς τὴν οἰκίαν) where Jesus is born. Characters who take an active role in one birth account are entirely absent in the other. The shepherds, angelic host, Simeon, and Anna all appear with Mary, Joseph and Jesus in Luke 2, but are not present in Matthew. The visiting magi, the escaping to Egypt by Jesus and family, and the killing of the children under two all figure prominently in Matthew 2, but are not mentioned in Luke’s Gospel.

5. The angel Gabriel visits both Zechariah and Mary to announce that each will have a son with a great spiritual destiny, despite physical conditions that should render childbirth impossible (Luke 1:8–19, 26–38). Both Mary and Zechariah sing psalms of praise to God in response to the miracles they experience (Luke 1:46–55, 67–79).

more than one wise person because of the plural noun, but the conviction that there were *three* wise men only comes from the three gifts. Perhaps there were *lots* of magi and they all chipped in! While the biblically non-existent innkeeper and numberless magi have their requisite pageant pronouncements, Mary—the maternal star of the show in this birth narrative⁶—remains silent as a sphinx in Christmas pageants. This soul who is most essential for the Christmas story to unfold accurately ends up with her role diminished, not magnified, in these staged renditions of the text.⁷

“Soul Magnification” therefore seeks to expand a churchgoer’s knowledge of the Christmas story by enlisting the help of the pageant. My goal is not to usurp any beloved traditions. Rather, I offer a short, simple play that could stand on its own or go before a typical pageant. Casting actors that stay the same in both this play and the traditional pageant to follow would bridge the two works together. However, the play below uses actors of all ages, not just small children because the ancient world was age-integrated. If a teenager plays Mary in the first play, the child playing her in the typical pageant might wear the same veil or some other costume accessory. This Christmas play is also a teenager’s story about courage, family, and faith.



6. Gabriel’s annunciation telling Mary that she will bear a child is stunning in the biblical context because she is unmarried. Other women in the Bible who have children through divine intervention all have husbands. Compare the stories of Sarah (Gen 15:2–4; 17:1–22; 18:1–15; 21:1–5), Rebekah (Gen 25:21–26), Rachel (Gen 30:1–22), Samson’s mother (Judges 13), Hannah (1 Samuel 1:1–20), the Shunammite woman (2 Kgs 4:11–17), and Elizabeth (Luke 1:5–19; 57–58).

7. For succinct and insightful discussion of Mary’s audacious role as Jesus’ mother in the infancy narratives, see Vasiliki Limberis, “Mary 1” in *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament* (eds. Carol Meyers, Toni Craven, and Ross S. Kraemer; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 116–119.

Soul Magnification

Characters:

Mom – middle-aged, down-to-earth

Marian – her 13-year-old (or so) daughter

(Mom and Marian would ideally be played by a mother and daughter in the congregation.)

Mary – teenager, about the age of Marian

Elizabeth – older woman

Zechariah – older man

(Elizabeth and Zechariah would ideally be played by an older married couple.)

Gabriel – any person with an angelic presence, someone who likes to dance/move

Notes: Two scenes unfold in this play. One is modern, one is biblical. The actors should be able to hold a “freeze” position for a few moments while the action switches to the other setting. Simple costumes of a tunic and headdress for the biblical characters will help to distinguish between the ancient and modern characters. Gabriel should wear a garment of white. (These costumes can be easily improvised.) Mom should be dressed casually (jeans, sweater, etc.) and Marian can either wear similar casual clothes or pajamas, to suggest bedtime.

Setting:

The action takes place in two areas of the stage (or chancel). Mom and Marian will occupy one corner downstage (toward the audience) throughout the show. The rest of the action takes place behind them center stage.

Mom enters, carrying a Bible and stands in front of the sofa. She and Marian will be in this area throughout the play. This corner represents a room in their home, maybe the living room. A covered chair or two together with pillows might function as a makeshift sofa. Some Christmas decoration or pillow should suggest that it is Christmas time.

Once Mom is in position, the play begins.

Mom: (*calling*) Marian, come here sweetie.

Marian enters and goes toward her mother.

Marian: (*rolling her eyes*) Mom, I’m getting a little old for this “sweetie” business.

Mom: (*kisses her forehead*) You’ll never be too old for that ... sweetie.

Marian rolls her eyes again but smiles a little. She isn’t genuinely angry.

Mom: Time for our tradition.

Marian: Seriously? You’re reading me the Christmas story ... *again?*

Mom: Ever since you were a baby, I’ve read it to you two nights before Christmas. Tomorrow night: church. Tonight: the Christmas story. We started with a baby board book, then different children’s books, and now that you’re thirteen, we’re going to read it from the actual Bible.

Marian: (*sarcastically*) Yee-ha. I can hardly wait.

Mom: (*sits on the sofa*) Marian, remember you said you would keep up our tradition as a Christmas present to me, so just get comfy, okay?

Marian: (*sighs and plops down next to Mom*) Fine.

Marian and her mother sit on the sofa and Mom begins to read from Luke 1:5–7. Mom opens the Bible and begins to read.

Mom: ^{Luke 1:5} In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

⁶ Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord.

⁷ But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

After Mom reads these verses, Zechariah and Elizabeth enter and occupy center stage behind Marian and Mom. They have sad expressions and Zechariah puts his arm tenderly around Elizabeth’s shoulder. They look at each other and it is clear that they have been through a lot together. Then they freeze.

Marian: Um...Mom, I hate to break it to you, but you must be in the wrong place. I know the Christmas story pretty well by now and I don’t know what you’re talking about.

Mom: This is the Christmas prequel.

Marian: What's a "prequel"?

Mom: It's the part of the story that leads up to the part you know. What I just read for you is in Luke chapter 1. Usually we start with chapter 2, but the Christmas story really begins with the priest Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, who is Mary's cousin.

Marian: Wait ... Mary has a *cousin*?

Mom: Yes, Elizabeth—the mother of John the Baptist.

Marian: (*slowly realizing the implications*) You're telling me that Jesus and John the Baptist are cousins?!

Mom: Perhaps more like first cousins once removed ...but yes. It's hard to know exactly how close they were by blood, but the Bible tells us that they are related.⁸

Marian: Who knew?

Mom: When you read the *actual Bible*, it's full of surprises.

Now where was I? ... Zechariah is in the temple...Here we are ... Luke 1:10 (resumes reading the Bible)

Elizabeth slips offstage where she puts a pillow under her tunic that will later show she is pregnant.

Zechariah stands on one side of the stage, looking toward the center.

Mom: ^{Luke 1:10} Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. (*Mom might look up to the congregation/audience, to subtly suggest that they have the role of the people here.*)

¹¹ Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.

Gabriel enters—dramatically. The actor can be creative, perhaps whirling into place or skipping to the center stage or making a Kramer-esque (a la Seinfeld) entrance. Gabriel goes right over to Zechariah. Zechariah watches Gabriel approaching and becomes increasingly scared.

Mom: ^{Luke 1:12} When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him.

Zechariah is visibly afraid crouches away from Gabriel as if expecting something awful to happen.

8. The Greek word that expresses the relationship between Mary and Elizabeth in Luke 1:36 (συγγενίς) is traditionally translated as "cousin" (e.g., the KJV, NJV), but might be better rendered as "relative" or "kinswoman," indicating some blood relation that is not clearly specified.

Gabriel: (reaching gently to bring Zechariah to full height) ^{Luke 1:13}

Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. ¹⁴ You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.

Zechariah: (*disbelieving*) ^{Luke 1:18} How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.

Gabriel: (*with authority and feeling—as if this is important and exciting information*) ^{Luke 1:19} I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.

Mom: (*reading from the Bible*) ^{Luke 1:24} After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived.

Elizabeth runs out to Zechariah, her pregnant stomach now visible. Gabriel looks at them, clearly very happy and satisfied.

Elizabeth: (*excited!*) ^{Luke 1:25} This is what the Lord has done for me! Zechariah and Elizabeth exchange big smiles and embrace, then walk offstage.

Gabriel makes her/his way around the stage—whirling, skipping, jumping, dancing, etc. then stops on the side of the stage where Zechariah and Elizabeth have exited, looking in the direction of where they went. Gabriel freezes.

Marian: I thought that the angel Gabriel came to *Mary*, not to Zecharah-whoever.

Mom: That's exactly what happens next. (*Turns back to the Bible and reads Luke 1:26–27*)

^{Luke 1:26} In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth,

²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

Mary comes to the stage and stands on the side of the stage opposite where Zechariah stood. Gabriel creatively dances, skips, etc. over to her.

Gabriel: (*excitedly*) ^{Luke 1:28} Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.

Mary looks scared and perplexed. She crouches away from Gabriel, much as Zechariah had done.

Gabriel: (*reassuring her*) ^{Luke 1:30} Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

(*with feeling—as if this is important and exciting information*)

³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.

³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.

³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.

Mary: (*utterly bewildered*) ^{Luke 1:34} How can this be, since I am a virgin?

Marian: Now *that* is a very good question.

Gabriel: (*hardly able to contain all the enthusiasm*) ^{Luke 1:35} The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God!!

³⁶ And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren.

³⁷ For *nothing* will be impossible with God.

Mary: (*slowly—as if really considering the possible consequences*) ^{Luke 1:38} Here am I, the servant of the Lord;

Takes a deep breath and then says with full conviction, even though she is still scared:

Let it be with me according to your word.

Gabriel flies/dances/skips, etc. off the stage.

Marian: (Looking up at Mom) It must have been very scary for Mary to be pregnant at such a young age.

Mom: I think it was. Mary has a lot more courage than we generally give her credit for. But then she does something really smart. She goes to tell someone she loves and trusts what has happened to her.

(Mom continues reading from the Bible—Luke 1:39–40)

^{Luke 1:39} In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country,

⁴⁰ where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

Mary runs around the stage purposefully, as if she is undertaking an important journey. Elizabeth stands profile on the stage looking very pregnant. When she comes out to center stage, Mary runs over to her.

Mary: (*joyfully*) Elizabeth!!

As soon as Mary says this, Elizabeth needs to push up the pillow/baby with the hand that is away from the audience. The audience should get the clear impression that the baby inside Elizabeth's womb has just jumped dramatically.

Elizabeth: (*Elizabeth looks down at her stomach, clearly surprised at what just happened. Then she looks up at Mary and her eyes widen in awe and joy. She continues exuberantly.*)

^{Luke 1:42} “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.

⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

Elizabeth gives Mary a hug, then walks off stage.

Marian: Wow. So, Mary knows that it's for real—she's going to have this baby, just like the angel said.

Mom: The same angel made the same prediction to Zechariah, and that one clearly came true. But Mary is in a tough situation. She is pregnant and not yet married. The story could go a lot of ways at this point.

Marian: So, what does she do?

Mom: (*smiling at Marian*) She praises God.

Mary stands center stage and recites this psalm with feeling. Keeping the words filled with meaning through vocal inflection will be hard to sustain since this is a long speech—but Mary should convey these lines as if she really believes them with her whole heart.

Mary: ^{Luke 1:46} “My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and Sarah and to their descendants forever.”

Marian: Then what happened after Mary praises God?

Mom: She went back home to her family. *(Mary walks offstage purposefully. Mom then continues, looking at Marian)*

Zechariah praises God, just as Mary did, then he and Elizabeth have their baby, John, who grows up to be known as John the Baptist.

Marian: And then Jesus is born?

Mom: *(Putting an arm around Marian)* Yes, but that part of the story has its own drama. *(Mom reads Luke 2:1–7 from the Bible.)*

(If this play is to serve as a prequel for the traditional Christmas pageant, the narrator for that pageant could read these words simultaneously with Mom to segue into the standard pageant. The narrator would freeze after the passage for Marian to say her line then the traditional pageant would continue.)

¹ Luke 2:1 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.

² This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

³ All went to their own towns to be registered.

⁴ Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David.

⁵ He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.

⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Marian: That’s the part of the story I already know.

Mom: *(Kisses her on the forehead.)* You sure do, sweetie.

Lights out

OR

Marian and Mom exit the stage and the traditional Christmas pageant continues.



This play hopes to strengthen families of faith by highlighting Mary’s role and courage as a young person, and thereby offer biblical insights in a way that is meaningful and accessible. Through decades of service to the Word and the Lord, the Christian family of faith has been strengthened by the teaching and scholarship of Wally Taylor in ways that only God fully knows. Perhaps the profound and purposeful career of Dr. Walter F. Taylor Jr. might best be summarized in the words of a young Galilean teenage girl: “My soul magnifies the Lord.”

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